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More heroin from Afghanistan pouring into U.S. cities

By Marisa Taylor McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON - More heroin from Afghanistan is hitting U.S. city streets, five years after the United States toppled the country's fundamentalist Taliban regime.

The surge comes as Afghanistan's opium production reached an all-time high last year despite attempts by the United States and its allies to beat back a resurgence of the Taliban and to reduce poppy cultivation.

Almost 90 percent of the world's opium is made from poppies grown in Afghanistan. Once refined, most of the heroin is shipped throughout Europe. As a result, the Afghan drug trade has been portrayed primarily as a European problem, rather than an American one.

But internal drug-enforcement reports indicate that U.S. authorities are seizing more Afghan heroin at U.S. ports and from low-level dealers in American cities.

The reports contradict the public statements of drug enforcement officials, who maintain that the amount of heroin reaching the United States from Afghanistan hasn't increased.

"Based on everything I've seen, the amount of heroin coming to the United States from Afghanistan has pretty much stayed the same," Joseph Keefe, an assistant deputy director with the Office of National Drug Control Policy, said in an interview.

Drug Enforcement Administration spokesman Steve Robertson echoed that assessment: "We're not seeing any increase being reflected in our intelligence."

However, U.S. officials have privately told their Afghan counterparts and some American lawmakers that they've detected an increase in the amount of heroin from Afghanistan.

"We have talked about these problems and this increase," said M. Ashraf Haidari, the first secretary of the Afghan Embassy in Washington. "It's logical that where there is demand there is a supply. Drugs from Afghanistan are making their way to the United States."

U.S. Rep. Mark Steven Kirk, a Republican who represents suburbs north of Chicago, said the Bush administration had been slow to respond to indications that more heroin from Afghanistan was coming to the United States. U. S. law enforcement officials also have told him privately that Afghanistan's share of the American heroin market is growing, he said.

"More heroin is definitely coming in from Afghanistan," said Kirk, who's visited Afghanistan as a reserve naval intelligence officer. "The problem is the official reporting lags as to what we're actually seeing in the streets."

The increase in the U.S. supply of Afghan heroin is further evidence that Afghanistan is awash in illicit opium and plagued by official corruption.

The United Nations has concluded that drug corruption in the country is widespread and entrenched. Last year, opium production reached historic levels, increasing 50 percent.

"The problem of narcotics in Afghanistan is a problem of national security for the United States," said Haidari, of the Afghan Embassy, who noted that "drugs finance terrorism."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat who serves on the Judiciary Committee, said that although Congress had set aside \$150 million last year for drug interdiction in Afghanistan "the results of that investment are not yet known."

"Any boost in the use of Afghanistan heroin at home is a matter of concern," she said.

The administration's silence on the matter makes it difficult to assess the scope of the problem, however.

Most heroin in the United States continues to come from Mexico and Colombia, experts said. Also, heroin addiction isn't as pervasive in the United States as cocaine and methamphetamine addiction.

But a DEA internal analysis found that 14 percent of the heroin seized in the United States in 2004 originated in Afghanistan, compared with 8 percent the year before. DEA officials refused to provide 2005 figures, saying they were still preliminary.

Seth Jones, an Afghanistan expert with the RAND Corp., a research center based in Santa Monica, Calif., said the 2004 report showed a significant increase in the DEA's seizures of heroin from Afghanistan but that the number could simply reflect incompetent drug traffickers whose shipments are being detected.

"The drug trade is murky," Jones said. "There's no perfect way to get a sense of what's being smuggled in."

The DEA attempts to monitor the U.S. heroin market by sending undercover agents to the streets to buy the drug.

In 2005, undercover agents reported a slight increase overall in heroin from Afghanistan compared with the previous year. St. Louis, Atlanta and New York reported significant increases.

That year, Afghanistan extradited reputed drug lord Baz Mohammad to the United States for trial on charges of shipping hundreds of pounds of heroin to the United States. The DEA accused Mohammad, who pleaded guilty, of hiring couriers to smuggle heroin into airports across the country, including New York, Chicago and Washington. The couriers hid the drugs in suitcases, clothing and containers.

Interviews with local police and regional DEA officials suggest that heroin from Afghanistan is appearing in cities throughout the Midwest.

The DEA found that Afghan heroin was readily available in Detroit, according to another internal report.

In Minneapolis, the DEA noted that Afghan, Pakistani, Turkish and Lebanese dealers in the city are "very active" in selling heroin from Afghanistan.

Elizabeth Dea, a narcotics agent for the Minneapolis police department, said her department didn't analyze the origin of heroin seized in her city. Most police departments rely on the DEA to determine the origin of heroin. Further complicating matters, fentanyl, a deadly form of synthetic heroin, is white and powdery and looks like heroin from Afghanistan.

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"All I know is that we're seeing more heroin," Dea said. "The quantities are much larger."

In 2003, her drug task force didn't confiscate any heroin. In 2005, it seized 2,465 grams - about 5.4 pounds.

McClatchy Newspapers obtained St. Louis' preliminary numbers for 2006, which show that undercover agents bought the same amount of heroin from Afghanistan as they did from South American and Mexico. In 2001 and 2002, agents hadn't encountered any heroin from Afghanistan.

But Afghan heroin isn't appearing everywhere.

Undercover agents assigned to DEA offices throughout the West, including Los Angeles, Dallas, Seattle and San Diego, have detected only heroin from Mexico.

Agents in Chicago, once considered the hub for Afghan heroin, have bought only heroin from Colombia, a relative newcomer to the market. Colombia has taken over the East Coast market by selling cheap and potent heroin.

Jorrit Kamminga, an analyst with the Senlis Council, a security research center with offices in London and Kabul, said that as Afghan heroin became cheaper and more plentiful, smugglers could turn to the United States for a new market. Colombian and Mexican drug traffickers have been producing less over the last several years, which could give Afghan suppliers the opening they need to move in, he said.

"But there is no hard evidence of this yet," he said.

McClatchy correspondent Jonathan S. Landay contributed to this report.

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